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# Food and companion animal welfare: The Islamic perspective

A Fuseini<sup>a</sup>, TG Knowles<sup>a</sup>, PJ Hadley<sup>b</sup>, SB Wotton<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>University of Bristol, School of Veterinary Science, Langford, Bristol. BS40 5DU. UK

<sup>b</sup>AHDB, Creech Castle, Taunton , Somerset. TA1 2DX

Correspondence: [awalfus@yahoo.com](mailto:awalfus@yahoo.com)

## Abstract

Much has been published regarding the animal welfare aspects of Halal slaughter, particularly when carried out without stunning. Although a significant number of animals are being stunned prior to Halal slaughter in the developed world, in fact, the majority of non-Muslims in these countries are still of the view that Muslims do not generally have compassion when it comes to the treatment of food animals, particularly at the point of slaughter. This is however a direct contrast to the teachings of Islam, as laid down in the Quran and the *Hadith* (Islamic scriptures). The Prophet of Islam, Mohammed (Peace Be Upon Him), through whom the Quran was revealed, was a known animal welfare advocate, and it is well documented that he disapproved and reprimanded any of his companions who fell short of the etiquette with respect to the treatment of animals in their care. This paper explores some important verses in the Quran, authentic narrations from the *Hadith* and academic literature on the welfare of both food and companion animals.

**Keywords:** Animal welfare, Islam, companion animals, food animals, stunning, slaughter,

## Review methodology

The Islamic Holy Book, the Quran and the Teachings of the Prophet, the *Hadith* (Sahih) were the main source of information regarding the position of animals in Islam. Further literature

searches were conducted through Google Scholar and Web of Science for Scientific Journals using the following terminologies; Animals and Islam, animal welfare in Islam and Halal slaughter.

## **1. Introduction**

The Quran and Hadith are the most important Islamic scriptures from which Muslims derive their dietary laws [1]. Both scriptures contain guidance on acceptable species of food animals and rules on how to farm, handle and slaughter animals for food, as well as covering the care of companion animals. The Quran solely contains all the commandments from *Allah* (God), whilst the *Hadith* (*Ahadith*-plural) is a compendium of the teachings and sayings of the Prophet of Islam. Various Quranic verses and *Ahadith* to be covered later in this paper emphasise the significance of animal welfare in Islam. The Quran is explicit in its comparison of man with non-human animals to emphasise the need for Muslims to show compassion to animals and other living creatures. It does also imply that animals are sentient beings just like man as seen in the following verse:

*'And there is no creature on earth or the birds that fly with their wings except (that they are) communities like you'* [2].

Shaykh Munajjid [3] argued that there is no verse in the Quran or *Saheeh Sunnah* (Verbally transmitted teachings of the Prophet) that indicates that animals have souls. However, Haque and Masri [4] and Foltz [5] dismissed this notion, they argued that it is contrary to Islamic teachings to assume that animals do not have souls. In fact some Muslims have insisted that the verse cited above (Quran 6:38) is an indication that animals have souls. Nonetheless, Taylor [6] reported that the Prophet's love for animals was highlighted in a number of *Ahadith* including the following, where he is reported to have said:

46    ‘Whoever is kind to the creatures of God is kind to himself’.

47    Abdul Rahman and Aidaros [7] highlighted the rich tradition of the Prophet with regard to the  
48    protection of the welfare of animal. The authors reported that the hoisting of animals and  
49    shackling of birds prior to Halal slaughter seem to violate the Islamic guidelines on slaughter  
50    because such procedures are not humane. In pre-Islamic Arabia, cutting and eating parts of live  
51    animals was considered a delicacy until the Prophet declared such products as Haram for Muslim [8].  
52    The classification of man and animals as the same communities in the above Quranic verse  
53    and numerous *Ahadith* signify the Prophet’s love for animals and the need for Muslims to  
54    follow his footsteps and respect God’s commandments. They also imply that animals require  
55    the same provisions in terms of food (feed), water, housing etc., and that they can  
56    undoubtedly perceive and feel pain when exposed to noxious stimuli. Haque and Masri  
57    (2011) reported that despite the clarity of the Quran and authentic narrations (*Ahadith*) on  
58    non-human animals, many Muslims appear to ignore the fact that the life of an animal is  
59    equally important as that of a human being. God does not shy away from outlining the  
60    punishment for those who misuse their authority over animals and other creatures on earth:

61    ‘Then We return him to the lowest of the lowest’ [9]

62    Muslims are therefore only allowed to kill animals if there is an absolute need for it, say, to  
63    satisfy their hunger (food) or for the protection of life, if they are in danger. For meat to be  
64    considered as Halal, the animal’s neck must be cut whilst it is alive, meat from animals that  
65    die (for whatever reason) before their necks are cut are considered Haram (Quran 5:3) . Some  
66    Muslims (*Sufis*) have resorted to vegetarianism [10-13] as a sign of respect for animals albeit  
67    this claim has been described as un-Islamic [14-15] since the Quran permits the consumption  
68    of meat [16]. The teachings of Islam also recognise the need for Muslims to protect the  
69    welfare of companion animals. The Prophet is reported to have had a lot of affection for his

pet cat, *Muezza* (17). It is also generally agreed that at the time of the Prophet, Muslims were encouraged to slaughter animals with what was described (at that time) as the most humane slaughter techniques in order to minimise pain and distress to animals. Islamic teachings emphasise *Ihsan* (excellence, perfection, proficiency) during the slaughter of animals as highlighted in the following two Ahadith:

*“Verily Allah has prescribed Ihsan in all things. So if you kill then kill well; and if you slaughter, then slaughter well. Let each one of you sharpen his blade and let him spare suffering to the animal he slaughters”* [18].

*“Whoever is merciful even when it comes to slaughtering a bird, Allah will have mercy on the person on the Day of Judgement”* [19].

The advent of new slaughter technologies (especially in the Western world) such as pre-slaughter and post-slaughter stunning of animals and the use of fixed mechanical blades (to slaughter poultry) has resulted in debate among Islamic jurists as to whether these practices are consistent with Islamic dietary laws. Stunning is defined according to European Council Regulation (EC1099/2009) [20] as “any intentionally induced process that causes loss of consciousness and sensibility without pain, including any process resulting in instantaneous death”. Stunning during Halal slaughter particularly divides Islamic scholarly opinion. Whilst some opponents of stunning are of the view that stunning cannot be accepted because it was not practiced by the Prophet [21], proponents of Halal stunning on the other hand insist that the practice is acceptable on condition that it is not the cause of death. This paper reviews animal welfare in the Islamic context with regard to food and companion animals and considers the animal welfare aspects of Halal slaughter. The paper aims to provide clarity on the position of the Islamic faith about how Muslims should treat food and companion animals

in their care, it further highlights instances where the Prophet of Islam demonstrated the highest level of compassion for the welfare of animals.

## **2. Companion animals in Islam**

Nearly all religions command some form of respect and compassion for animals [22-24]. In some parts of the world, some species are worshipped [25], it is therefore taboo for anyone to kill or mistreat these animals in such communities [26-27]. Within the Muslim community, Islamic jurists agree that dog meat is Haram (forbidden) [28], but there is disagreement among Islamic jurists regarding the keeping of dogs as pets. Some Islamic jurists are of the view that dogs are ritually ‘dirty’ animals [29] and cannot even be kept as pets, they however approve the use of dogs in hunting and guarding [30]. The Prophet is also reported to have said that Angels do not enter houses where dogs are kept [31]. Others are of the view that classifying dogs as “dirty” is not Islamic, but a pre-Islamic Arabian culture [32].

One may argue, if dogs were indeed dirty animals, the Quran would have explicitly prohibited Muslims from consuming game caught by dogs, but this is not the case [33-34]. Abu Hurayrah [35] narrated in a number of *Ahadith* that the Prophet told his companions about the significance of taking care of animals and that he cited an instance when a serf was blessed for saving the life of a thirsty dog by providing it with water [36]. Watt [37] remarked that the Prophet’s compassion towards animals was remarkable in view of his social upbringing and the culture of his people prior to Islam and cites the following *Hadith*:

*‘On his way to Mecca with his companions during the time of war in 630 CE, the Prophet is reported to have ordered his companions to post a sentry in order not to disturb a female dog that had just given birth.’*

Those who regard dogs as dirty animals have also quoted *Ahadith* to support their claim, although some Muslims debunk those *Ahadith* as ‘unauthentic’ and that there do not appear to be any Quranic verses to support this claim. It is reported in a *Sunni Hadith, Al-Muwatta* [38] that the Prophet once said that the companionship of dogs reduces the good deeds of Muslims. It has been reported that some *Sunni* (one of 2 sects in Islam, the other being Shia) narration regards black dogs as the manifestation of evil in animal form [39-42].

Due to the controversy surrounding the cleanliness of dogs, some Muslim travellers in the West have expressed concern about the use of sniffer dogs at airports to detect drugs and explosives during routine security checks. In their response, the British Transport Police reiterated the need for the continued use of sniffer dogs [43]. However, they admitted that cultural sensitivities would be taken into consideration. Dogs appear to be the only species of companion animal that divides Muslim opinion as to whether they can be kept as pets. Other animals such as cats, fishes, birds etc. are generally accepted and kept as pets by Muslims. The Prophet himself is known to have owned a pet cat [44] and a horse and one of his companions, Abu Hurayrah also had a pet cat and the name Abu Hurayrah literally means ‘Father of the kitten’ in Arabic [45].

### **3. Food animals in Islam**

Islamic *Shariah* law outlines what is permissible (Halal) or prohibited (Haram) in terms of food animals [46-47]. Muslims must abide by these dietary laws unless in a situation of genuine need. The following Quranic verse prohibits Muslims from killing animals by strangulation or violent blow and it also outlines other foods and slaughter practices deemed unacceptable. Halal authorities that do not accept captive bolt stunning during Halal slaughter usually base their interpretation on this verse. Although captive bolt stunning may not always

138 result in immediate death of animals, its mode of application is interpreted by these  
139 authorities to be a ‘violent’ blow to the head:

140 *‘Prohibited to you are dead animals, blood, the flesh of swine, and that which has been*  
141 *dedicated to other than Allah , and (those animals) killed by strangling or by a violent blow*  
142 *or by a head-long fall or by the goring of horns, and those from which a wild animal has*  
143 *eaten, except what you (are able to) slaughter (before its death), and those which are*  
144 *sacrificed on stone altars, and (prohibited is) that you seek decision through divining arrows.*  
145 *That is grave disobedience.’ [48].*

146 Due to the Prophet’s affection for animals, he repeatedly highlighted the reward for being  
147 kind to animals to his companions. The Quran also recognises the importance of animals to  
148 human beings in the following verse:

149 *‘And the grazing livestock He has created for you, in them you derive warmth (clothing) and*  
150 *numerous benefits and from them you eat’ [49]*

151 Even though man is permitted to derive the above benefits from animals, the Islamic  
152 scriptures call for animal caregivers to provide adequate housing, feed and forbid all forms of  
153 abuse of animals. The Prophet is reported to have asked one of his companions to return eggs  
154 taken from a nest in order to spare the laying bird distress. The Prophet then told his  
155 companion that there is reward for acts of kindness to animals. The punishment for  
156 unnecessary killing of animals is narrated in the following *Hadith*:

157 *‘Whoever kills a sparrow or any creature bigger than that without a justifiable reason, that*  
158 *person would be accountable for his actions on the Day of Judgement’ [50].*

159 The Prophet was then asked by his listeners to clarify what is regarded as a justifiable cause.  
160 He is reported to have said that if you kill to eat and not just to chop off its head and throw it



away, that would constitute a justifiable reason. The religious scriptures also warn Muslims against confining animals and depriving them of basic necessities such as food, water, exercise or the ability to express their normal behaviour [51]. Some Islamic jurists have even suggested that some modern livestock agricultural systems such as highly intensive farming and some animal husbandry procedures such as castration, disbudding, tail docking etc. may not fully comply with the Islamic guidance on rearing animals [52-53]. It is narrated that the Prophet disapproved tail docking and the cutting of the mane in horses [54] a practice that interferes with the natural beauty of horses:

*'Do not clip the forelock of a horse, for a decency is attached to its forelock; nor its mane, for it protects it; nor its tail, for it is its fly-flap'* [55].

The mutilation of nonhuman animals is also forbidden in Islam, the Prophet is reported to have disapproved the branding of animals. On his way past a donkey that was branded on the face, Jabir bin Abdullah narrated that the Prophet said:

*“God curse the person who has branded this animal”* [56].

The above Islamic guidance on the provision of sufficient feed and water, the avoidance of unnecessary pain and suffering, avoidance of mutilation and the prohibition of confining animals resonate well with the five animal welfare freedoms that were formalised in 1979 by the UK's Farm Animal Welfare Council (57).

### **3.1 The slaughter of animals in Islam (Zabiha).**

Followers of the Islamic faith are divinely commanded that if they eat meat, God's name must be recited during the slaughter of the animals from which the meat is derived [58]. Extensive reviews of the requirements of Halal slaughter can be found in Farouk [59],

183 Nakyinsige et al [60] and Farouk et al [61]. The main requirements are summarised as  
184 follows.

- 185 • The animal must be a Halal acceptable species [62-63]
- 186 • The animal must be alive at the point its neck is cut [Qur'an 5:3].
- 187 • The person bleeding the animal should preferably be a Muslim and the *tasmiyah* (a  
188 short prayer) must be recited by the slaughterman/woman saying: Bismillah Allahu  
189 Akbar (In the name of God, God is great) [64]. It must be noted that Muslims are also  
190 permitted to eat meat from animals slaughtered by Jews and Christians [Qur'an 5:5],  
191 although some Muslims insist that only orthodox Christian and Jewish meat is  
192 permissible whilst others unconditionally reject all meat from animals slaughtered by  
193 Jews and Christians (Fuseini et al 2017; HFA, 2014).
- 194 • All flowing blood must be drained out of the carcass. This is because Muslims are  
195 prohibited from eating blood (Qur'an 5:3).
- 196 • The blade/ knife must be surgically sharp to swiftly sever the appropriate blood  
197 vessels in a single movement of the knife.

198 During the 12<sup>th</sup> Conference of the OIE Regional Commission for the Middle East in Amman,  
199 Jordan [65], it was concluded that Islamic law on the welfare of animals during slaughter was  
200 compatible with the OIE international standard on improving animal welfare at slaughter.  
201 Further, relevant aspects of Islamic law pertaining to the transport of animals were also found  
202 to be animal welfare compliant, however, some animal transport and slaughter practices in  
203 the region (Middle East) fell short of the required standards. Traditional Halal slaughter does  
204 not involve the use of any form of stunning, many researchers have demonstrated that this  
205 method of slaughter is painful [66-69]. Others are of the view that traditional Halal slaughter  
206 (without stunning) is as humane as slaughter prior to stunning (Grandin and Regenstein,

1994). European Council Regulation EC1099/2009 requires that animals must be allowed to lose consciousness before further processing if they are slaughtered without stunning. As a guide, the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) [70] stated that animals slaughtered without stunning can remain conscious for up to 20s (sheep), 2 minutes (cattle), 2.5 minutes (poultry) and 15 minutes (fish). Similarly, over 1,400 years ago, the Prophet forbade the further processing of carcasses after slaughter until such time that consciousness was irreversibly lost. The Prophet said:

*‘Do not rush to deal with a ‘being’ until they are completely dead’* [71].

There is enough evidence to suggest that with the Prophet’s love for animals, coupled with the requirement for the use of a sharp knife and a thorough bleed-out during *Zabiha*, this method of slaughter would have been regarded as ‘Best Practice’ in terms of animal welfare, food hygiene and safety at the time. The advent of relatively new slaughter technologies such as stunning, mechanical slaughter (of poultry) and thoracic sticking has raised questions as to whether these new techniques meet the Islamic dietary laws [72]. Understandably, some Muslims are of the view that the requirements of *Zabiha* are divine instructions from God and cannot therefore be adapted to new slaughter techniques such as stunning (e.g. the UK’s Halal Monitoring Committee and France’s AVS Association). They also argue that the new techniques do not offer any animal welfare, meat safety or quality advantages over traditional *Zabiha* slaughter and also that animals may die before their necks are cut when they are pre-stunned, thus breaking the second requirement listed above. Proponents of stunning during Halal slaughter generally accept the practice [73] if the following conditions are met [74]:

- Stunning must not result in the death of animals prior to the neck-incision.
- The rate and efficiency of bleed-out must not be adversely affected by the method of stunning employed.

- The method of stunning must not cause any physical injury to the animal.
- Any method of stunning used must not be a violent blow to the head in line with Quran 5:3.

The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), an inter-governmental body representing 57 countries with the aim of safeguarding and protecting Muslim interests is tasked with unifying all the global Halal standards [75]. It is hoped that a consensus will be reached on the status of pre-slaughter and post-neck cut stunning of animals for Halal production. Cenci Goga et al [76] observed that the absence of an overarching authority within the Muslim community has resulted in a lack of clarity in situations where there are clashes between the religions and cultures of consumers. This has resulted in the formation of several Halal certification bodies with a view to assuring Muslim consumers of the Halal status of food.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Followers of the Islamic faith are permitted to slaughter certain animals for food and for other benefits. However, they are expected to follow strict guidelines in the protection of the welfare of these animals in line with God's commandments in the Qur'an and the teachings of the Prophet in various *Ahadith*. Given the above, it could appear that many Muslims have deviated from the teachings of Islam regarding the care of companion and food animals. The Prophet is said to have practiced and preached the need for Muslims to spare animals avoidable pain during Halal slaughter of food animals. Muslims who fall short of the expected etiquette are considered to have violated God's commandments, and it is believed that any Muslim who acts contrary to the Qur'an and Hadith will be held accountable for his/her actions on the Day of Judgement.

The Prophet of Islam was vouched to be kind and merciful to animals even at a time when his countrymen were very cruel to animals. He is reported to have outlawed some of the abhorrent practices such as cutting parts of live animals for food, branding animals with hot iron bars etc. A number of *Ahadith* and Quranic verses illustrate the need for Muslims to feed, water and provide the right environment for animals to live. There are rewards for Muslims who protect animals from harm.

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